

APPARATUS AND METHOD FOR DISPENSING PRODUCTS

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FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to product dispensers. The present invention also relates to the use of a product dispenser to dispense a
10 product.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Liquid products, such as liquid cleaning products, are used throughout residential and commercial properties in a variety of
15 applications. Although liquid products have tremendous utility, liquid products have a number of shortcomings. One primary shortcoming is the bulkiness and weight of liquid products. Packaged liquid products are usually either made relatively small to keep the weight low, or made relatively large causing an undesirable increase in product
20 weight.

Solid products are generally more convenient, safe and economical than liquid products because they do not spill or splash, have reduced manufacturing and distribution costs, and require less storage space. However, solid products must first be converted to a
25 liquid before they can be used in most applications. Generally, a dispenser uses water to dissolve the solid product and stores the resulting liquid "use" solution prior to being pumped into a vessel to be cleaned.

There is a need in the art for a product dispensing apparatus for
30 preparing liquid products for use in residential, commercial, and industrial applications, as well as, an improved method of preparing liquid products for use in residential, commercial, and industrial applications.

35 SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention addresses some of the difficulties and problems discussed above by the discovery of a product dispensing

system, and methods of using the product dispensing system. The product dispenser of the present invention may be used to prepare a liquid solution, such as a cleaning, sanitizing or rinse aid solution, having a desired concentration of active ingredients. The liquid solution is prepared from a solid product, which dissolves to produce a liquid solution having a desired concentration of solid product dispersed therein.

Accordingly, the present invention is directed to a product dispenser and a method of making the product dispenser. The present invention is also directed to a product dispenser in combination with one or more solid products. The present invention is further directed to product dispensing systems, which include a product dispenser in combination with one or more additional system components.

One exemplary product dispensing system of the present invention comprises (a) a product dispenser; (b) a product mix tank; (c) a dispenser conduit from the product dispenser into the product mix tank; and (d) a pump for transporting fluid from the product mix tank to the product dispenser. The product dispensing system of the present invention may further comprise one or more pieces of water-soluble solid product positioned within the product dispenser of the product dispensing system. When water contacts the solid product, the solid product dissolves to form a liquid use solution, which may be used in a number of applications.

The product dispenser within the product dispensing system may comprise a number of components. In one exemplary embodiment of the present invention, the product dispenser comprises one or more product spray nozzles positioned within the housing of the product dispenser. In this embodiment, fluid from the product mix tank is pumped into the product dispenser through the one or more product spray nozzles to contact solid product within the product dispenser.

The product mix tank within the product dispensing system may also comprise a number of components. In one exemplary embodiment of the present invention, the product dispenser comprises at least one water inlet, wherein at least one water inlet comprises one or more water fill nozzles positioned within an upper portion of the product mix tank. Other possible components within the product mix

5 tank include, but are not limited to, (i) at least one fluid level indicator, (ii) at least one monitoring device for monitoring at least one property of fluid within the product mix tank, (iii) at least one control device for controlling at least one component within the product mix tank, and (iv) at least one circulation nozzle positioned within the product mix tank, wherein at least a portion of the fluid from the product mix tank circulates through a pump and at least one circulation nozzle.

10 In a further exemplary embodiment of the present invention, the product dispensing system comprises a microprocessor for controlling and/or monitoring one or more controllable and/or monitorable parameters of the product dispensing system.

15 The present invention is further directed to a method of making a liquid solution using a product dispensing system. The method provides a liquid solution having a desired concentration of one or more active ingredients. One exemplary method of making a liquid solution using a product dispensing system of the present invention comprises (a) positioning a product dispensing system relative to a water source; (b) placing one or more pieces of solid product in a product dispenser of the product dispensing system; (c) filling a product mix tank of the product dispensing system with a desired amount of water; and (d) pumping water from the product mix tank into the product dispenser so that the water comes into contact with the one or more pieces of solid product to form the liquid use solution, which drains from the product dispenser into the product mix tank.

20 25 The method of making a liquid solution using a product dispensing system of the present invention may further comprise a number of step including, but not limited to, (e) circulating fluid within the product mix tank through a pump, a circulation valve, and one or more circulation nozzles positioned within the product mix tank; (f) controlling a fluid level within the product mix tank with one or more fluid level indicators; (g) monitoring at least one property of fluid within the product mix tank with a monitoring device; and (h) monitoring or controlling at least one parameter of the product dispensing system with a microprocessor.

30 35 The product dispensing system of the present invention may be used in a number of applications. One exemplary application comprises the product dispensing system of the present invention in

combination with a cooking apparatus, such as a rotary fryer (e.g., used to cook French fries), wherein liquid use solution from the product dispensing system is used to clean one or more components of the rotary fryer.

5 These and other features and advantages of the present invention will become apparent after a review of the following detailed description of the disclosed embodiments and the appended claims.

10 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURES

FIG. 1 depicts an exemplary product dispensing system of the present invention;

15 FIG. 2 depicts an exemplary product dispenser within an exemplary product dispensing system as shown in FIG. 1;

FIGS. 3A-3D depict a flowchart detailing an exemplary method of using a product dispensing system of the present invention; and

20 FIGS. 4A-4B depict a flowchart detailing an exemplary method of using a product dispensing system of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

To promote an understanding of the principles of the present invention, descriptions of specific embodiments of the invention follow and specific language is used to describe the specific embodiments. It will nevertheless be understood that no limitation of the scope of the invention is intended by the use of specific language. Alterations, further modifications, and such further applications of the principles of the present invention discussed are contemplated as would normally occur to one ordinarily skilled in the art to which the invention pertains.

30 The present invention relates to a product dispensing system for forming a liquid "use" solution from water and at least one solid product. As used herein, the terms "use solution" and "liquid use solution" refer to an aqueous solution resulting from the interaction of water and a solid product within a product dispenser of the present invention. The product dispensing systems of the present invention comprise a product dispenser in combination with one or more additional system components. Desired use solutions, such as

cleaning solutions, may be prepared using the product dispensing systems of the present invention as described below.

I. Product Dispensing Systems

The present invention is directed to product dispensing systems comprising a product dispenser, a solid product, and system components for converting the solid produced to a liquid “use” solution. In one exemplary embodiment of the present invention, the dispensing system comprises (i) a product dispenser comprising a housing having a cavity configured and arranged to receive a solid product, the housing having a bottom, a top, and at least one side defining the cavity; an inlet/outlet for water into and out of the housing; an optional support member positioned within the cavity, wherein at least a portion of the support member is positioned at a distance, d , above the outlet of the housing; and (ii) a solid product positioned on the support member. Desirably, the product dispenser housing is capable of withstanding at least about 30 psi of water and/or air pressure within the housing cavity.

In a further exemplary embodiment of the present invention, the dispensing system comprises (i) a product dispenser having a cavity, and (ii) a solid product, wherein the cavity and solid product have substantially similar cross-sectional configurations. In this embodiment, the solid product fits into the cavity in such a way that a user instantaneously knows how to input the solid product. Other features of product dispensers and suitable solid products for use in the present invention are described below.

An exemplary product dispensing system of the present invention is shown in FIG. 1. As shown in FIG. 1, product dispensing system 10 comprises product dispenser 11 attached to product mix tank 12 via dispenser conduit 36. Exemplary product dispensing system 10 further comprises pump 13, which transports fluid from within product mix tank 12 to one or more of the following locations: product dispenser 11, circulation nozzles 16 within product mix tank 12, and one or more vessels to be cleaned (not shown) via transfer valves 24. Water is supplied to product mix tank 12 via hot water supply line 26 and cold water supply line 27. As shown in FIG. 1, regulators 44 and 45 may be positioned within hot water supply line

26 and cold water supply line 27, respectively. Further, a tempering valve 28 may be used to form a desired mixture of hot and cold water. Water exiting tempering valve 28 through first water conduit 46 may pass through strainer 29 to remove any particulate material within the water supply. Water valve 30 may be used to control water flow into product mix tank 12. A vacuum breaker, such as vacuum breaker 31, may be positioned between water valve 30 and product mix tank 12 along second water conduit 32 in order to provide exposure to atmospheric pressure once pressure within second water conduit 32 falls below a pressure threshold. Typically, the pressure threshold is about 5 to 15 psi.

Water enters into product mix tank 12 via one or more water fill nozzles 25 positioned within an upper surface 47 of product mix tank 12. As shown in FIG. 1, fluid exiting product dispenser 11 through dispenser conduit 36 also enters product mix tank 12 through opening 37 within upper surface 47 of product mix tank 12. Further, as shown in FIG. 1, recirculated fluid may enter into product mix tank 12 through side wall inlet 38.

Exemplary product mix tank 12 contains low level float indicator 17, high level float indicator 18, overflow outlet 19, drain outlet 20, and pump outlet 42. A drain valve, such as drain valve 21, may be positioned within drain conduit 43 to manually and/or automatically drain product mix tank 12, as well as, capture fluid exiting overflow outlet 19. Also shown within product mix tank 12 is fluid monitoring device 22, which may be used to measure a property of a fluid within product mix tank 12. In one exemplary embodiment of the present invention, fluid monitoring device 22 may be used to detect the concentration of a given active ingredient within a liquid solution positioned within product mix tank 12.

One desirable feature of exemplary product dispensing system 10 is the ability to circulate liquid within product mix tank 12. As shown in FIG. 1, fluid may be removed from product mix tank 12 through pump outlet 42 and transported via pump 13 through pump conduit 39, recirculation conduit 40, circulation valve 15, circulation nozzle conduit 41, and circulation nozzles 16 to be deposited back into product mix tank 12. Another desirable feature of exemplary product dispensing system 10 is the ability to spray solid product (not shown)

positioned within product dispenser 11 with liquid from product mix tank 12. As shown in FIG. 1, liquid may be removed from product mix tank 12 via pump outlet 42 and transported through pump 13, pump conduit 39, recirculation conduit 40, product spray valve 14, spray conduit 33, into product dispenser 11 via product dispenser inlet 34 within a bottom surface 48 of product dispenser 11. Liquid may be allowed to come into contact with solid product positioned within product dispenser 11 as detailed in FIG. 2 below. Liquid containing dissolved solid product exits product dispenser 11 through product dispenser outlet 35 into dispenser conduit 36, which is deposited within product mix tank 12 through opening 37 within upper surface 47 of product mix tank 12.

The above-described product dispensing system 10 of the present invention may comprise a number of components as shown in FIG. 1. Each individual component of product dispensing system 10 may be formed from conventional materials used to form conduit, mixing tanks, etc. Each individual component of product dispensing system 10 may be formed from any material having structural integrity and being capable of contacting water and/or solid product. For components that come into contact with only water, suitable materials for forming the components include, but are not limited to, plastics, glass, ceramics, metal, or any combination thereof. Typically, components that come into contact with only water are formed from metals such as copper or plastics such as polyvinyl chloride (PVC) or chlorinated polyvinyl chloride (CPVC). For components that come into contact with water, solid product, and liquid use solution resulting from the combination of water and solid product, the components are desirably formed from materials including, but not limited to, plastics, glass, ceramics, metal, or any combination thereof. Typically, these components are formed from a non-reactive, non-corrosive metal, such as stainless steel, or an unreactive plastic, such as PTFE (TEFLON[®]) or PVDF (KYNAR[®]).

In preferred embodiments of the present invention, the product dispensing system further comprises a programmable logic controller or microprocessor that provides process control features to the product dispensing system. For example, any of the above-mentioned valves may be opened or closed using a microprocessor, as well as, opened

for a desired length of time, which may be monitored by the microprocessor. In addition to fluid monitoring device 22, sensors may be positioned throughout product dispensing system 10 to provide feedback to the microprocessor. Suitable sensors include, but are not limited to, liquid level sensors connected to or separate from low level float indicator 17 and high level float indicator 18, pressure gauges located throughout product dispensing system 10, temperature gauges distributed throughout product dispensing system 10, and a solid product detection sensor that detects when additional solid product needs to be added to product dispenser 11.

A variety of programmable logic controllers or microprocessors may be used within the product dispensing system of the present invention. Suitable microprocessors include, but are not limited to, the fanuc Versa Max microprogrammable logic controller available from General Electric Company (Fairfield, CT).

The product dispensing system of the present invention is desirably connected to an electricity source such as 120 volt AC 15 amp receptacle. Further, the product dispensing system of the present invention desirably is connected to both a cold and hot water supply having a minimum water pressure for each supply line of at least about 30 pounds per square inch (psi) and a maximum water pressure of about 70 psi.

The overall dimensions of the product dispensing system of the present invention may vary depending on the given application. In one exemplary embodiment of the present invention, the product dispensing system is used in combination with a rotary fryer for cooking French fries. In this embodiment, the overall dimensions of the product dispensing system may be as follows: height - about 114.3 cm (45 in.); width - about 50.8 cm (20 in.); and depth - about 48.3 cm (19 in.).

The product dispensing system may be positioned relative to a water source for supplying water to the product dispensing system and one or more containers or vessels for receiving the liquid use solution exiting the product dispensing system (e.g., a cooking apparatus).

The above-described product dispensing system 10 may be used in a variety of applications where a liquid use solution is desired. Typically, the product dispensing system is positioned at a location

within a residential, commercial or industrial property for easy access for a user. One or more pieces of solid product are positioned within the product dispenser and replaced as needed. In some applications, the solid product is used for a single batch operation. In other applications, solid product is used on more of a continuous basis, such that additional solid product is placed into the product dispenser on a regular basis.

A. Product Dispenser

A variety of product dispensers may be used in the above-described product dispensing system of the present invention. The product dispenser enables the interaction of water with one or more water-dissolvable solid products. The product dispenser may have any configuration, shape and size, which enable water to come into contact with the one or more water-dissolvable solid products. Although reference may be made to a particular size and shape, it should be understood that the product dispenser of the present invention is not limited in any way to a particular design, size or shape.

The product dispenser typically comprises a number of components. In one embodiment, the product dispenser of the present invention comprises (i) a housing having a cavity configured and arranged to receive a solid product, wherein the housing has a bottom, a top, and at least one side defining the cavity; (ii) an inlet for inputting water into the housing; (iii) an outlet on the bottom of the housing in addition to the inlet; and (iv) an optional support member positioned within the cavity, wherein at least a portion of the support member is positioned at a distance, d , above the outlet of the housing. Each component of the product dispenser provides a given function so as to produce a desired use solution having a desired concentration of solid product therein.

The product dispenser may include a solid product support member positioned within the cavity of the housing. The support member may have a solid continuous structure, such as a metal foil or plastic film, or may have a discontinuous, permeable structure, such as a mesh or screen formed from materials including, but not limited to, metals, plastics, and combinations thereof. In one embodiment of the present invention, the support member comprises a continuous

structure in a horizontal plane within the cavity of the product dispenser, wherein the upper surface area of the support member is less than the surface area of the horizontal plane such that water may flow through the horizontal plane from below the continuous structure to contact the water-dispersible product positioned on the continuous structure. It should be noted that the support member may have a configuration other than one, which is within a single horizontal plane within a cavity of the product dispenser. For example, the support member may have a V-shape, U-shape, W-shape or any other configuration as long as the support member is capable of supporting a water-dispersible product within the product dispenser.

In a further embodiment of the present invention, the support member comprises a permeable structure in a horizontal plane within the cavity of the product dispenser, wherein the upper surface area of the support member is less than or equal to the surface area of the horizontal plane such that water may flow through and/or around the support member from below the permeable structure to contact the water-dispersible product positioned on the support member. As discussed above, the permeable support member may have a configuration other than one, which is within a single horizontal plane within a cavity of the product dispenser. For example, the permeable support member may have any of the configurations described above (i.e., V-shape, U-shape, W-shape, or other shape).

A portion of the support member may be positioned at a distance, d , above the outlet of the housing. For support members having a V-shape, U-shape, or W-shape as described above, the lower portion of the support member may actually rest on an upper surface of the outlet of the housing. In other embodiments, the lower portion of the support member having a V-shape, U-shape, or W-shape may be at a distance, d , above the outlet of the housing, while an upper portion of the support member is positioned at a distance, $(d + t)$, above the outlet of the housing, wherein t represents the overall thickness of the support member.

The product dispenser further comprises one or more openings to allow access to the housing so that solid product may be positioned in the housing. Each opening may be sealed with an attachable cover to seal the housing after loading the product dispenser with solid

product. Typically, the product dispenser has a single opening and attachable cover for providing access to the product dispenser cavity. Each of the one or more covers may be separable from and removable from the product dispenser or may be attached to the product dispenser using any conventional method of attaching. In one embodiment, a hinge is used to attach a cover to the product dispenser, so that the cover may be removed and reconnected to the product dispenser without being detached from the product dispenser.

The product dispenser may be formed from any material having structural integrity and being unreactive to water and solid product. Suitable materials for forming the product dispenser include, but are not limited to, plastics, glass, ceramics, metal or any combination thereof. Desirably, the product dispenser comprises a clear or transparent plastic cover material, which allows a visual inspection of any solid product in the cavity. In one embodiment of the present invention, at least a portion of the product dispenser comprises a transparent material to allow a visual inspection of one or more portions of the product dispenser, desirably, at least the interior of the cavity and any solid product therein. As described below, the product dispenser is desirably formed from a material that can withstand up to about 30 psi of water pressure exerted on the cavity surfaces of the product dispenser.

An exemplary product dispenser is shown in FIG. 2. As shown in FIG. 2, exemplary product dispenser 11 includes housing cavity 49 surrounded by upper surface 54, at least one side wall 53, and bottom surface 48. As shown in FIG. 2, support member 50 supports solid product 52 positioned within cavity 49 of product dispenser 11. Product dispenser 11 may further comprise one or more product spray nozzles 51 positioned below support member 50, when present.

As shown in FIG. 2, water enters product dispenser 11 through product dispenser inlet 34 via spray conduit 33. Once inside product dispenser 11, water flows through spray nozzle conduit 56 to one or more product spray nozzles 51. Water exiting product spray nozzle 51 comes into contact with water-soluble solid product 52 and produces a liquid use solution, which exits product dispenser 11 through product dispenser outlet 35 and dispenser conduit 36.

As discussed above, product dispenser 11 may have a size and shape so that the product dispenser matches a given water source and/or a container or vessel for receiving the use solution. In one exemplary embodiment of the present invention, the product dispenser has a circular shape; however, it should be understood that other shapes are within the scope of the present invention. Suitable shapes include, but are not limited to, a rectangular shape, a square shape, a triangular shape, a star shape, an arrow shape, a rhombus shape, a trapezoid shape, etc. Desirably, the product dispenser has dimensions as follows: an overall height ranging from about 7.6 cm (3.0 inches) to about 45.7 cm (18.0 inches); an overall length ranging from about 15.2 cm (6.0 inches) to about 61.0 cm (24.0 inches); an overall width ranging from about 5.1 cm (2.0 inches) to about 30.5 cm (12.0 inches); and a height of at least a portion of product support member 50 above product dispenser outlet 35 ranging from greater than 0 to about 40.6 cm (16.0 inches).

In one embodiment of the present invention, the product dispenser comprises a cavity, wherein the cavity has a cross-sectional configuration, which matches a cross-sectional configuration of the solid product to be used in the product dispenser. In this embodiment, the solid product fits into the cavity of the product dispenser in such a way that a user cannot incorrectly input the solid product into the cavity of the product dispenser without altering the configuration of the solid product. Suitable cavity/solid product cross-sectional configurations for use in this embodiment of the present invention include, but are not limited to, a star-like cross-sectional configuration, an arrow cross-sectional configuration, and a diamond cross-sectional configuration.

An exemplary product dispenser/solid product system, wherein the cavity of the product dispenser and the solid product have a similar cross-sectional configuration, is described in U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 10/139,612 filed on May 02, 2002, and entitled "Product Dispenser," the subject matter of which is hereby incorporated herein in its entirety by reference.

When solid product is placed in the product dispenser, it is desirable for the solid product to have a total volume equal to or less than a cavity volume bordered by the top of the housing, the support

member, and at least one side of the housing. One or more pieces of solid product may be used to fill the cavity volume. Desirably, the one or more pieces of solid product may be stacked one on top of the other to fill the cavity volume, and also provide a consistent surface area of solid product within a horizontal plane of solid product as one moves along a vertical direction within the product dispenser cavity. Such a configuration enables a consistent dispersion of solid product into the water, which contacts the solid product.

As discussed above, the product dispenser may have any dimensions necessary for a given application. For more continuous applications wherein an amount of solid product is used on a continuous basis, the dimensions of the product dispenser may be selected such that the cavity has relatively small cross-sectional dimensions when compared to the height of the cavity. In this embodiment, numerous solid products may be stacked on top of one another.

The product dispensers and product dispensing systems of the present invention accurately dispense cleaning, rinse, and/or sanitizing products. The product dispensers are ideal for use in combination with cooking apparatus to provide cleaning solutions during a cleaning mode, but many other applications are also possible. Other uses and applications where dispensing of a solid product is desired are also possible with the present invention, and the product dispensers disclosed herein could be used with a variety of containers or other use solution receiving devices.

B. Solid Product

A variety of solid products may be used in the above-described product dispensers. The solid products comprise one or more water-dissolvable components, which are formed into a desired shape having a desired size. The solid products may have any shape or size suitable for use in the product dispensers. For example, the solid products may be in the form of pellets, beads or powders having a size such that hundreds of pieces of solid product fill a given product dispenser. The pellets, beads or powders may be shaped into larger pieces of solid product such that only one or a dozen pieces of solid product fit within a given product dispenser. Typically, the solid products have a

circular, rectangular, square, triangular, arrow-like, rod-like, or star-like shape as described above. Desirably, the solid products have a circular, rectangular, square, or arrow-like shape.

5 In one desired embodiment of the present invention, the solid product has a size, which enables one or more pieces of solid product to be placed within the cavity of the product dispenser, wherein each piece of solid product has a configuration, which increases the surface area of the piece of solid product. For example, a solid product may have a rectangular or square shape, and also have one or more holes through the rectangular or square shape in a direction parallel or perpendicular to a horizontal axis of the solid product. Other solid product configurations may include fins or slots within the product to increase the surface area of the product. Suitable solid product configurations for use in the present invention include, but are not limited to, solid product configurations disclosed in U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 10/139,612 filed on May 02, 2002, and entitled "Product Dispenser," the subject matter of which is hereby incorporated herein in its entirety by reference.

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20 The solid products may comprise one or more water-dissolvable components. Suitable water-dissolvable components include, but are not limited to, components selected from caustic cleaning compositions, rinse aids, detergents, surfactants, sanitizers, pest control agents, or a combination thereof. Suitable solid products include, but are not limited to, products disclosed in U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 09/282,001, filed on March 29, 1999 entitled "SOLID POT AND PAN DETERGENT" and assigned to Ecolab Inc. (St. Paul, MN), the entire contents of which are herein incorporated by reference. Desirably, the solid product comprises a caustic cleaning composition, such as caustic cleaning compositions available from Ecolab Inc. (St. Paul, MN).

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35 Solid products having an increased surface area may be formed from any of the water-dissolvable components described above. In addition, solid products having an increased surface area may be formed from commercially available solid products including, but not limited to, the MAGFUSION Product from Ecolab Inc. (St. Paul, MN).

II. Methods of Making a Liquid Use Solution

The present invention is further directed to a method of making a liquid use solution. The method may comprise: (i) positioning a product dispensing system, a water source, and a container (or other receiving device) relative to one another; (ii) placing one or more pieces of solid product within a product dispenser of the product dispensing system; (iii) causing water to enter into the product dispenser such that the water comes into contact with the solid product for a desired contact time to form a use solution; optionally, (iv) collecting the use solution that exits the product dispenser for storage; and (v) transporting the use solution to a receiving vessel.

The method may produce a use solution for use in a variety of containers or other receiving devices. Suitable receiving devices for use in the present invention include, but are not limited to, a cooking apparatus, a warewashing apparatus, a sink, a bucket, a laundry machine, a sauna, a carwashing apparatus component (i.e., a holding tank for storing car washing solution), or a pool. In one desired embodiment of the present invention, the method produces a cleaning solution and the receiving device is a cooking apparatus, such as a rotary fryer.

One exemplary method of the present invention may be further described with reference to FIGS. 3A-3D. The exemplary method 150 depicted in FIGS. 3A-3D begins at start block 100 and proceeds to decision block 101. At decision block 101, a decision is made whether or not to add solid product to the product dispenser. If a decision is made to add solid product to the product dispenser, the method proceeds to step 102 wherein the product dispenser is opened. The method then proceeds to step 103 in which one or more solid product pieces are placed into the product dispenser. At step 104, the product dispenser is sealed to prevent contamination of the solid product. The method then proceeds to step 105.

Returning to decision block 101, if a decision is made not to add solid product to the product dispenser, the method proceeds directly to step 105 wherein water is introduced into the product mix tank 12. The method then proceeds to decision block 106 wherein a determination is made as to whether a desired water level has been reached within product mix tank 12. If a determination is made at

decision block 106 that the desired water level has not been reached, the method returns to step 105 as described above. If a determination is made that a desired water level has been reached at decision block 106, the method proceeds to step 107 wherein the water supply to product mix tank 12 is stopped. The method then proceeds to step 108 wherein pump 13 is activated. From step 108, the method proceeds to step 109 wherein product spray valve 14 is opened to enable water to flow into product dispenser 11.

Method 150 proceeds to decision block 110 wherein a determination is made as to whether the current process is a flush cycle. If a determination is made that the current process is not a flush cycle, the method proceeds to decision block 111. At decision block 111, a determination is made as to whether the desired product concentration of the liquid use solution within product mix tank 12 has been reached. If a determination is made at decision block 111 that the desired product concentration of the liquid use solution has not been reached, the method proceeds to step 112. At step 112, circulation valve 15 is opened for a fixed time period, t_1 . The method then proceeds to step 113 wherein circulation valve 15 is closed for a fixed period of time, t_2 . The method then proceeds to step 114 wherein the method returns to decision block 111. Method steps 112 through 114 are repeated until the product concentration of the liquid use solution within product mix tank 12 is reached. It should be noted that during steps 112 through 114, pump 13 and product spray valve 14 remain activated, which results in additional solid product being added to the liquid use solution within product mix tank 12. Although fixed time periods t_1 and t_2 may vary for a given application, fixed time periods t_1 and t_2 typically range from 5 to 60 seconds, desirably, from about 25 to about 35 seconds.

The length of time required to reach a desired product concentration within the liquid use solution may vary depending on a number of factors including, but not limited to, the water temperature, the solid product composition, the water solubility of the solid product, and the desired concentration level. Typically, the length of time necessary to reach a given concentration level will be up to about 30 minutes. In one exemplary embodiment of the present invention, the length of time needed to reach a concentration level of 8% by

weight solids within a 3.5 gallon liquid use solution is about 15 minutes.

5 Returning to decision block 111, once the product concentration level has been reached, the method proceeds to step 115 wherein product spray valve 14 is closed. The method then proceeds to step 116 wherein pump 13 is deactivated. From step 116, the method proceeds to step 117 wherein circulation valve 15 is closed. At this point, the liquid use solution within product mix tank 12 may be mixed for a desired period of time or immediately transferred to a receiving vessel. From step 117, the method proceeds to step 118 wherein one or more transfer valves 24 is opened. The method then proceeds to step 119 wherein pump 13 is again activated to transport liquid use solution from product mix tank 12 to a receiving vessel via one or more transfer valves 24.

10 From step 119, the method proceeds to decision block 120 wherein a determination is made as to whether the liquid use solution level within product mix tank 12 has dropped to a desired level. If a determination is made that the liquid use solution level has not dropped to a desired level, the method proceeds to step 121 wherein liquid use solution continues to be transferred to a receiving vessel. From step 121, the method proceeds to step 122 wherein the method returns to decision block 120. Once the liquid use solution level within product mix tank 12 drops to a desired level, the method proceeds to step 123 wherein pump 13 is deactivated. The method then proceeds to step 124 wherein one or more transfer valves are closed. The method then proceeds to decision block 125.

15 At decision block 125, a decision is made whether or not to drain the product mix tank 12. If a decision is made to drain product mix tank 12, the method proceeds to step 126 wherein drain valve 21 is opened. The method then proceeds to step 127 wherein drain valve 21 is closed once product mix tank 12 is empty. The method then proceeds to decision block 128.

20 Returning to decision block 125, if a decision is made not to drain the product mix tank, the method proceeds directly to decision block 128. At decision block 128, a decision is made whether or not to flush the product dispensing system. If a decision is made not to flush the product dispensing system at decision block 128, the method

proceeds to stop block 129. If a decision is made to flush the product dispensing system, the method proceeds to step 130 wherein solid product is removed from the product dispenser. The process of removing solid product from product dispenser 11 comprises opening product dispenser 11, removing solid product 52 from product dispenser 11, and sealing product dispenser 11. From step 130, the method proceeds to step 131, which returns method 150 to step 105. At step 105, the flush cycle portion of the method proceeds from step 105 to decision block 110 as described above. At decision block 110, a determination is made that the present process cycle is a flush cycle, and method 150 proceeds to step 132. At step 132, pump 13 is activated and runs for a fixed time period t_3 , wherein t_3 is desirably greater than t_1 plus t_2 . The method then proceeds to step 133 wherein circulation valve 15 is opened for a fixed time period, t_1 . The method then proceeds to step 134 wherein circulation valve 15 is closed for a fixed period of time, t_2 . The method then proceeds to decision block 135.

At decision block 135, a determination is made as to whether time period t_3 has expired. If a determination is made that time period t_3 has not expired, the method returns to step 133 and proceeds as described above. Once time period t_3 has expired, the method proceeds to step 136 wherein product spray valve 14 is closed. The method then proceeds to step 137 wherein pump 13 is deactivated. The method then proceeds to step 138 wherein circulation valve 15 is closed. The method then proceeds to step 139 wherein drain valve 21 is opened to drain product mix tank 12. The method then proceeds to step 140 wherein drain valve 21 is closed once product mix tank 12 is empty.

From step 140, the method proceeds to decision block 141. At decision block 141, a decision is made whether or not to repeat the flush cycle. If a decision is made to repeat the above-described flush cycle, the method proceeds to step 142 wherein the method proceeds to step 105 and proceeds as outlined above. If a decision is made not to repeat the above-described flush cycle at decision block 141, the method proceeds to stop block 143.

The method of the present invention may be used to prepare a use solution having a desired concentration of solid product within an

aqueous solution. A number of variable may be considered to obtain a desired use solution concentration including, but not limited to, the contact time between the water and the solid product, the water temperature, the dissolving rate of the solid product, the chemical formulation of the solid product, the shape of the solid product, the amount of surface area of the solid product, and the water flow rate into and out of the product dispenser. By adjusting one or more of the above variables, a use solution concentration may be obtained within a desired length of time.

As discussed above, the process dispensing system of the present invention may comprise a programmable logic controller or microprocessor to provide one or more process control features to the product dispensing system. Variables such as fixed time periods t_1 , t_2 , and t_3 , may be inputted into the microprocessor and monitored to automatically open and/or close valves within the product dispensing system. Further, historical information such as the length of time needed to drain product mix tank 12, may be inputted into the microprocessor to further control the length of time that drain valve 21 remains opened. As described above, many other process variables may be monitored using process control equipment including, but not limited to, fluid pressure within individual components of the product dispensing system, the temperature of equipment and/or liquid within the product dispensing system, as well as, system malfunctions within the product dispensing system.

An exemplary process control flow chart for a product dispensing system of the present invention is provided in FIGS. 4A-4B. As shown in FIG. 4A, method 200 begins at start block 201. Method 200 proceeds to step 202 wherein one or more process control set points are checked for one or more variables such as water level, product concentration level, and product transfer completion status. It should be noted that exemplary method 200 describes process control parameters water level, product concentration level, and transfer completion status; however, any other process control variable may also be monitored in a similar manner as described in exemplary method 200. From step 201, the method proceeds to decision block 203. At decision block 203, a determination is made as to whether the water level set point has been reached. If a determination is made that

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the water level set point within product mix tank 12 has not been reached, the method proceeds to steps 204A and 204B. In step 204A, a microprocessor activates water valve 30 to begin filling product mix tank 12. At the same time, in step 204B an electronic water fill time-out clock is started. In this embodiment, a time limit is placed on the process of filling product mix tank 12. If product mix tank 12 is not filled to a desired level within the designated amount of time, an alarm is triggered as described below.

10 From steps 204A and 204B, method 200 proceeds to step 205 wherein a fresh water fill cycle is initiated. The method then proceeds to decision block 206 wherein a determination is made whether or not both level float indicators (i.e., low level float indicator 17 and high level float indicator 18) are open (i.e., the water level within product mix tank 12 has not exceeded the level as determined by low level float indicator 17). If a determination is made that both level floats are open, method 200 proceeds to decision block 207. At decision block 207, a determination is made whether or not the time designated to fill product mix tank 12 has been exceeded. If a determination is made that the “water fill time-out” has not been exceeded, the method returns to step 205 as described above. Method 200 proceeds to step 206, step 207, and step 205 until both floats are not in an “open” position (i.e., the water level has exceeded a level as determined by low level float indicator 17). Once one float is not open, method 200 proceeds from decision block 206 to decision block 208.

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20 At decision block 208, a determination is made as to whether the low level float indicator 17 is closed and the high level float indicator 18 is open. If a determination is made that low level float indicator 17 is closed and high level float indicator 18 is open, method 200 proceeds from decision block 208 to decision block 207 as described above. The method will proceed from decision block 208 to decision block 207 to step 205 and back to decision block 208 until high level float indicator 18 is not opened. At that time, method 200 proceeds to decision block 209.

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30 At decision block 209, a determination is made as to whether or not both low level float indicator 17 and high level float indicator 18 are in a closed position. If a determination is made that both float indicators are not in a closed position, method 200 proceeds to

decision block 207 as described above. At decision block 207, if a determination is made that the water fill time-out limit has been exceeded, the method proceeds to step 210 wherein a level-sensing malfunction alarm is triggered.

5 Returning to decision block 209, if a determination is made that both the low level float indicator 17 and the high level float indicator 18 are in a closed position, method 200 proceeds to step 211 wherein the water fill status is set to a “completed” mode. Method 200 then proceeds to step 212, which transfers method 200 to decision block 213.

10 At decision block 213, a determination is made as to whether or not the concentration level of solid product within the liquid use solution has been reached. If a determination is made that the concentration level of solid product within liquid use solution has not been reached, method 200 proceeds to step 214. In step 214, the microprocessor opens spray valve 14 and activates pump 13. The method then proceeds to step 215 wherein a “charge-up cycle” is initiated. As used herein, the term “charge-up cycle,” refers to the process of exposing solid product 52 to water in order to increase the concentration of solid product within the liquid use solution as described in steps 108 through 117 of process 150 depicted in FIGS. 3A-3D. From step 215 (as shown in FIG. 4B), method 200 proceeds to decision block 216 wherein a determination is made as to whether the concentration level of solid product within the liquid use solution has reached a set point. If a determination is made by the microprocessor that the concentration level of solid product within the liquid use solution has not reached a set point, method 200 proceeds to decision block 217.

15 At decision block 217, a determination is made as to whether the microprocessor has detected the absence of solid product 52 within product dispenser 11. If a determination is made that the product dispenser 11 is empty or needs additional solid product 52, method 200 proceeds to step 218 wherein an empty alarm output is initiated by the microprocessor. If a determination is made at decision block 217 that product dispenser 11 is not empty (or does not need additional solid product 52), method 200 returns to step 215 as described above. Once a determination is made at decision block 216 that the

concentration level of solid product within the liquid use solution has reached a set point, method 200 proceeds to step 219. At step 219, the microprocessor provides a “ready to transfer” output to indicate that the liquid use solution is ready to be transferred to a receiving vessel. Method 200 then proceeds to step 220 wherein the microprocessor waits for a transfer request. The method then proceeds to step 221, which transfers method 200 to step 222.

At step 222, the microprocessor waits for a transfer request signal. Method 200 then proceeds to decision block 223 wherein a determination is made as to whether or not a transfer request has been received. If a transfer request has not been received by the microprocessor, method 200 returns to step 222. Once a transfer request is received by the microprocessor, method 200 proceeds to steps 224A and 224B. In step 224A, the microprocessor sends a signal to open at least one transfer valve 24 and activate pump 13. At the same time, a transfer time-out clock is started in step 224B. The transfer time-out clock counts down a programmed amount of time that it typically takes to transfer a batch of liquid use solution from product mix tank 12 to a receiving vessel. If the actual transfer cycle exceeds the programmed amount of time counted off by the transfer time-out clock, a transfer time out error occurs as discussed below.

From steps 224A and 224B, method 200 proceeds to step 225 wherein a transfer cycle is initiated. As used herein, the term “transfer cycle,” refers to the steps relating to transferring a liquid use solution from product mix tank 12 to a receiving vessel. An example of such steps may be found in FIGS. 3A-3D, steps 118 to 124. From step 225, method 200 proceeds to decision block 226 wherein a determination is made as to whether or not low level float indicator 17 is “active.” As used herein, the term “active” refers to a signal sent to the microprocessor when low level float indicator 17 is in a down position. If a determination is made that low level float indicator 17 is not active, method 200 proceeds to decision block 227. At decision block 227, a determination is made as to whether the transfer clock time-out has exceeded a set programmed length of time. If a determination is made that the transfer clock has not exceeded a set programmed period of time, method 200 returns to step 225 and proceeds as described above. If a determination is made at decision

block 227 that the transfer clock has exceeded the set programmed period of time, method 200 proceeds to step 228 wherein the microprocessor generates a transfer time-out error output signal.

5 Returning to decision block 226, if a determination is made that the low level float indicator 17 is in an active position (i.e., a signal is sent to the microprocessor indicating that low level float indicator 17 is in a down position), method 200 proceeds to step 229 wherein the microprocessor generates a transfer complete output signal. Method 200 then proceeds to stop block 230.

10 In one embodiment of the present invention, the method of making a use solution comprises producing a use solution, which is dispersed in a cooking apparatus, a warewashing apparatus, a sink, a bucket, a laundry machine, a sauna, a carwashing apparatus component (i.e., a holding tank for storing car washing solution), a pool, or any other container. When used with a cooking apparatus, the product dispensing system may be mounted proximate a water source either outside of or within the cooking apparatus.

15 In a further embodiment of the present invention, the method of making a use solution comprises producing a use solution for a rotary fryer, such as a rotary fryer used to produce French fries for fast-food restaurants, such as McDonald's restaurant.

20 The present invention is further illustrated by the following examples, which are not to be construed in any way as imposing limitations upon the scope thereof. On the contrary, it is to be clearly understood that resort may be had to various other embodiments, modifications, and equivalents thereof which, after reading the description herein, may suggest themselves to those skilled in the art without departing from the spirit of the present invention and/or the scope of the appended claims.

25 While the specification has been described in detail with respect to specific embodiments thereof, it will be appreciated that those skilled in the art, upon attaining an understanding of the foregoing, may readily conceive of alterations to, variations of, and equivalents to these embodiments. Accordingly, the scope of the present invention should be assessed as that of the appended claims and any equivalents thereto.